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- Sino-Soviet relations
- Gromyko UN speech
- PRC on Hong Kong's future

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COMMENTARY

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CHINA - UK

THATCHER VISIT ELICITS FIRM PRC LINE ON HONG KONG'S FUTURE

During Prime Minister Thatcher's visit Beijing sought to balance its assertion of sovereignty over Hong Kong with its concern to preserve the colony's stability and prosperity in the future. Beijing's firm position on the sovereignty issue was given sharp expression in reaction to Thatcher's invocation of existing treaty commitments.

Prime Minister Thatcher's 22-26 September visit to China--the first by a British head of government--provided both sides an opportunity for a high-level exchange of views on Hong Kong's future status following the expiration in 1997 of Britain's lease on the New Territories, the bulk of the area under British jurisdiction. According to XINHUA reports, after the initial round of talks on the 22d with Premier Zhao Ziyang--customarily devoted to a review of international issues of "common concern"--Thatcher had talks with Zhao and Deng Xiaoping on the 23d and 24th that focused almost exclusively on the Hong Kong question.

TALKS ON HONG KONG

Consistent with Chinese concerns over the colony, Beijing throughout the visit enunciated an approach that combined conciliation and patience with firmness on the issue of sovereignty. Premier Zhao set the tone of Beijing's approach in his remarks welcoming Thatcher on 22 September in suggesting that "problems left over from history"--a clear reference to Hong Kong--would "not be difficult" to resolve as long as both sides took the five principles of peaceful coexistence--which include mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity--"as the basis" for "consultations."

Beijing's approach was also evident in its treatment of Thatcher's conversations with Deng on the 24th. Incorporating what Thatcher acknowledged thereafter to be an agreed statement of both countries' approach to the issue, XINHUA stated that the two leaders had "far-reaching talks in a friendly atmosphere on the future of Hong Kong" and "made clear their respective positions on the subject." Both agreed, it went on, "to enter talks through diplomatic channels" with "the common aim of maintaining the stability and prosperity of Hong Kong." XINHUA thereafter added on its own an emphatic reminder that Beijing's "position on the recovery of the sovereignty of the whole region of Hong Kong is unequivocal and known to all."

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With talks with London in prospect following the Thatcher visit, Beijing seemed at pains to make clear that its applicability or future arrangement for Hong Kong does not extend to the issue of sovereignty itself, as evidenced by the speed and sharpness of its rejoinder to statements by Thatcher after leaving China, responding to her assertions at a press conference in Hong Kong on the 27th that the 19th century treaties governing the status of the colony remain the basis of Britain's position, a Foreign Ministry Information Department spokesman's statement on the 30th, reported by XINHUA the same day, asserted Beijing's "consistent position" to be that "China is not bound by the unequal treaties and that the whole Hong Kong area will be recovered when conditions are ripe."

EVOLUTION OF PRC APPROACH

Beijing over the years has on occasion claimed sovereignty over Hong Kong but has usually been extremely cautious in making such assertions in the interest of maintaining a stable political and financial situation in the colony. The March 1972 Sino-British communique normalizing bilateral relations at the ambassadorial level, for example, made no direct reference to the Hong Kong question while committing both sides to the five principles of peaceful coexistence, although a mere five days earlier Beijing had put its view on record. In a letter to the UN Special Commission on Decolonization, not carried by Chinese media at the time but recalled on the eve of the Thatcher visit by the Beijing foreign affairs magazine SHIJI ZHISHI (World Knowledge), China rejected the validity of the "unequal treaties" and declared that Beijing "proposes to use appropriate methods to solve peacefully" the Hong Kong question "when the time is ripe and until then to maintain the status quo."

More recently, Beijing gradually has spelled out an approach toward bringing Hong Kong under PRC sovereignty consistent with its acknowledged interest in preserving the island's economic utility. That approach—which has evolved concurrently with Beijing's elaboration of its position on Taiwan's reunification—has projected Hong Kong's incorporation as a "special zone." XINHUA in June 1980, for example, cited then Guangdong Governor Xi Zhongxun as observing that Hong Kong is already "actually a special zone" whose "status quo should be maintained to promote stability and prosperity."

The PRC's draft constitution, due for promulgation later this year, explicitly provides for "special administrative zones," and Beijing has implied the applicability of that provision for Hong Kong as well as Taiwan. National People's Congress Vice Chairman

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Peng Zhen in July, for example, enjoined "compatriots" in Taiwan, Macao, and Hong Kong to study the new constitution, and the article on special zones in particular. The Hong Kong leftwing press meanwhile has reported a variety of statements by Beijing leaders this year--including Deng Xiaoping, party General Secretary Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang--elaborating the application of this idea to Hong Kong.

In that vein, XINHUA on the eve of the Thatcher visit seemed to point up the durability of Chinese commitments to Hong Kong's continued prosperity in the context of discussing long-term economic plans in Shenzhen, the special economic zone that abuts Hong Kong and the New Territories. XINHUA on 21 September reported Shenzhen's mayor as consulting with several Hong Kong investors on the zone's 20-year development plan and cited their expressions of satisfaction that the plan would "contribute to the stability and prosperity of Hong Kong" itself. (U/FOUO)

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